



**STATE OF HAWAII  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH**

## **Facts About Botulism**

Botulism is a muscle-paralyzing disease caused by a toxin made by a bacterium called *Clostridium botulinum*.

### **There are three main kinds of botulism:**

- Foodborne botulism occurs when a person ingests toxin that leads to illness within a few hours to days. Foodborne botulism is a public health emergency because the contaminated food may still be available to others.
- Infant botulism occurs in a small number of infants each year who harbor *C. botulinum* in their intestinal tract.
- Wound botulism occurs when wounds are infected with *C. botulinum* that secretes the toxin.

With foodborne botulism, symptoms begin within six hours to two weeks (most commonly between 12 and 36 hours) after eating toxin-containing food. Symptoms of botulism include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, muscle weakness that always descends through the body: first shoulders are affected, then upper arms, lower arms, thighs, calves, etc. Paralysis of breathing muscles can cause a person to stop breathing and die, unless assistance with breathing (mechanical ventilation) is provided.

Botulism is not spread from one person to another. Foodborne botulism can occur in all age groups.

A supply of antitoxin against botulism is maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The antitoxin is effective in reducing the severity of symptoms if administered early in the course of the disease. Most patients eventually recover after weeks to months of supportive care.